In Arras time and space can be manipulated—and so can people. Beautiful Spinsters work day and night in four coventries to ensure a perfect world, but above them all, at the top of the high tower, works the Creweler. Until the Creweler makes a decision to help a young girl escape. Now bound by the strands of the universe, trapped between her memories and mistakes, subject to brutal experiments, Loricel has one more impossible decision to make. The Girl in the High Tower is an original short story set in Gennifer Albin's Crewel World. The final book in the series, UNRAVELED, is available October 7th.

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Loricel couldn't move. If she had had the use of her hands, she might have been able to break free from the strands binding her to the vault, but thick, steel gages prevented her from even flexing her fingers. Time and space had been warped, running through her and tethering her to her prison. She had never considered herself claustrophobic, but trapped without the use of her body, she fought the waves of panic that rolled through her. A sense of defeat often followed the surges of anxiety. She'd given her life willingly so that her young apprentice could escape. She hadn't expected to die; Cormac Patton would never allow that. But she also hadn't expected to spend day after day as a lab rat.

Of course, it was impossible to measure the passing of time. Perhaps it had only been a few days since Adelice had escaped the Guild with her aid. At best, weeks. At worst, years. Time itself was too fluid in Arras—too easily changed—to know for certain.

It was difficult to feel triumphant in this state. Still, as her mind cycled endlessly from day to night, from dusk to dawn, she knew one thing.

They hadn't succeeded.

It was both a blessing and a curse to be aware of the movements in the lab. She couldn't block the crisp click of heels across the tile floor. She couldn't release the slow ache building in her trapped muscles. But she could hear them. That's how she knew.

The transplant had been unsuccessful. Arras was without a Creweler. The Tailors had continued to experiment, drawing bits of her from her hands and arms, tangling their fingers deep inside her mind as they searched for the unique genetic abilities the Guild's mapping procedure had revealed. Would they eventually concede failure? And when that day came would she find peace at last?

No.

There would be no peace until they had what they wanted. All she could do was hope—hope that her faith in a young girl was well founded.

Hope that the girl could do the impossible—the one thing Loricel had never been brave enough to do herself.

The woman's skin was paper white and nearly translucent. Loricel did her best not to stare at the network of bluish veins visible through the woman's thin skin. Everything about Kinsey was delicate—fragile as a butterfly's wing—and this forced Loricel to speak in softer tones and tip her feet onto her toes as she walked.

The Creweler's studio was much more solid, particularly the formidable loom that sat in the center of the space, surrounded by the stone walls of the high tower. Its brass wheels turned and clicked, making it appear more ancient than the slick, steel looms that young Spinsters used in the crowded Coventry workrooms. Loricel ran her fingers over the foreign words etched into the machine's wooden frame. An electric tingle vibrated through her hands. This loom was more powerful than the others she'd worked on. Whatever work was done in this studio was much more important than weaving a rainstorm in a sector or moving food rations between metros.

The work done here was vital. The energy pulsing through her told her that much.

The realization terrified her—and thrilled her.

Kinsey studied her, not bothering to hide her appraising stare. “How old are you?”

Loricel pulled her hands from the loom, uncertain if they were trembling from the power of the loom or because the Creweler’s inquisition was coming. It was an odd question—one the Creweler must already know the answer to—but she had to answer it. She turned to face the older woman, raising her chin slightly as she spoke. “I’m eighteen.”

“And when you were retrieved, how did you feel?”

“Honored,” Loricel said, the words rushing from her. A blush crept over her cheeks. Her father had always called her overly excitable. Apparently she hadn’t grown out of that yet. She ignored the ghostly squeeze around her heart at the thought of her family.

“You’ve spent two years here. Do you still feel honored?” Kinsey’s tone flattened on the final word.

Had she said the wrong thing? Girls were supposed to feel honored to serve Arras. So very few were chosen for the life of privilege. So few ever experienced lightning flashing on their fingers or the cool, silky strands of water or the vibrant hum of life in a metro’s weave. She knew that other girls grumbled, complaining about sitting at the looms for long hours, backs hunched over the delicate work. But Loricel had never felt that way. At the loom she was lost, caught in a moment of pure creation. The hours streamed by as she wove. “I do,” she answered coolly.

Kinsey’s lips pressed into a tight-lipped smile. “The Guild will be pleased to have such a malleable young Creweler.”

Her tone was no longer flat. There was an edge to her words that stung as Loricel comprehended what she meant, but the intended slight was lost in

the girl’s shock. “I’m going to be a Creweler?”

“Did you think I invited you here for a tour?” Kinsey bit out. She folded her withered hands in her lap as her eyes flickered between Loricel and the grand loom.

Loricel shook her head, embarrassed that she hadn’t suspected as much.

“And unsullied to boot,” Kinsey said, mostly to herself.

“Of course I maintained purity standards!” It was insulting to think otherwise. Surely, the Creweler understood that.

Kinsey snorted and passed to the loom, her movements surprisingly fluid for her age. “That will change.”

“What will change?” She couldn’t mean Loricel’s purity. That was simply . . . unthinkable.

“All of it,” Kinsey said bitterly. “It will all change.”

“There’s no reason to suspect the donor will succumb to stress.” The voice was muffled, but she knew it was male. Having spent most of her natural life, and then some, surrounded by the persistent hum of strands, Loricel could tune them out and focus on the one she needed to hear. Now, here, with her vision temporarily clouded, her other, already keen senses were heightened.

“You must concede that its material will eventually run out.” The words weren’t quite a rebuke, but there was a harshness to them.

Had she the ability, Loricel might have rolled her eyes—or, at least, given the men a good tongue lashing for calling her *it*. Instead, all she could do was ignore the barrage of comebacks filtering into her brain.

“Subject B—”

“Do you really think that will take?” The man sounded incredulous. Loricel could picture him running his hands through his hair. “It’s highly experimental at best. *Suicidal* at worst.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell them that?”

There was a humorless laugh. “Them? Do you honestly believe they signed off on this? There’s only one person capable of such insanity.”

“Should the Guild be informed? If they knew he was sanctioning dangerous trials—”

“Patton is the Guild,” the other man warned. “Never forget that.”

“If that’s the case, then we should get to work. Have you drawn those samples?”

Silence fell over the space, broken only by approaching footsteps. The Tailor grumbled under his breath as he loosened the strands binding Loricel’s arm. Searing pain split through her flesh as his deft fingers pried apart the very threads of her being. She couldn’t cry out or pull away, so she did the only thing she could: she faded back into a time where her hands weren’t bound—a time before the pain.

A time before she understood what she was truly a part of.

Kinsey lay on an exam table, a series of monitors tracking her vital signs. The formidable woman looked like nothing more than a skeleton draped with tattered skin. But it wasn’t her feeble appearance that was shocking. Large tears rippled down her arms and legs; her chest was splayed; her body had been ripped open. The work was delicate—as precise as though someone had simply cut and opened her up. Her skin was pulled back, exposing the Creweler’s frail threads to Loricel’s talented eyes.

Though there was little blood, bile burned up her throat, and Loricel fought to swallow it back.

A man Loricel had never met but knew on sight crossed to her. His dark hair was smoothed back from his too perfect face. She'd expected Cormac Patton to look less ideal in real life. He didn't. It was unnatural, and between his appearance and Kinsey's current state, Loricel had to fight to remain composed.

"As you know, Kinsey needs transplants to preserve—"

"I didn't know she needed transplants," Loricel blurted out. She immediately wished she could shove the words back inside her mouth.

Cormac's lips twisted ruefully. He cocked his head as if to say, *Is she serious?*

"I know she's older, so I suppose she must need medical treatments," Loricel continued, unable to halt her nervous chatter.

"You have no idea." Cormac paced the length of the room, pausing to brush his hand over Kinsey's. Loricel half expected it to crumble to dust, but it didn't. There was an odd tenderness to the gesture she didn't understand.

And she wasn't about to ask someone as formidable as Ambassador Patton.

"Kinsey didn't tell you about her procedures," Cormac mused out loud. "I suppose, then, it's time for you to understand."

Loricel's mouth went dry, but she forced a question past her parched tongue. "Understand what?"

"The sacrifice," he said. His eyes traveled over her, lingering too long on her girlish figure. "And the reward."

She already knew the reward. She'd experienced the euphoric moment of creation, felt time on her fingertips. It was addicting. She couldn't imagine life without the pulse of the loom before her. Whatever sacrifice had to be made—she could make it.

"Kinsey is running out of time," he told her.

“How old”—Loricel paused a moment before continuing—“how old is she?”

“Older than you can imagine.” Cormac waited a moment for this to sink in. “Crewelers are a rare thing. Not only do they make our world possible, they keep it in check. But they must also wait for their replacement. However long that takes.”

“How long did it take?” Loricel asked in a voice that was barely a whisper.

Cormac gave her a measured look, but didn’t answer.

“What are they doing to her?” Her voice was louder now, but not by much.

“They’re trying to give her more time.” He left Kinsey’s side and strode to stand before the girl. “It’s not necessary, though, now that she’s found you.”

“But how could they give her more time?” Loricel didn’t understand. She’d seen wondrous things on the loom, realities that defied explanation, but she’d never seen anything like this. Up until a few moments ago it hadn’t even occurred to her that a human could be manipulated the same way a weave could be.

“Arras knows of Spinsters,” he explained, “but few people know of Tailors. Men can also manipulate matter and time, but only a person’s matter and time.”

“Can a woman do it?” If she was shocked, she didn’t show it.

“We’ve never found one who could. Tailors are as essential to Arras as Spinsters, but their work is more dangerous.”

That’s why she had never heard of them. They operated in the shadows, while Spinsters worked in the tower, adored by the population.

“A Tailor can take donated material and patch it into a person.”He dismissed the look of horror that flashed across her face and continued, “Time, for instance. Kinsey needed time—time to find you.”

Realization was beginning to dawn on her in terrible certainty. “Donated?”

“They take the time from those citizens that no longer need it.”

“How can they no longer need it?” Loricel’s voice raised an octave as she fought to retain her composure.

“It wouldn’t do for our people to know that our world isn’t perfect. Humans are flawed creatures, Loricel. Some of them don’t deserve the time they are given.”

“So they don’t give it willingly?” Her voice was cold and filled with dread.

“No.”

The response was enough to fit the final pieces of the puzzle together. Kinsey lived because others died. Because she had to live and continue serving Arras until . . . “And me?”

“You will search as well. If you’re lucky it won’t take you as long as it took Kinsey.”

Loricel’s eyes fell on her predecessor’s pale body. A blessing and a curse. She could touch life, feel it between her fingers, but her own life would never have the same vibrance. It would be unnatural. Unless she found someone to take over. But when she did, she would no longer have the loom. Bitterness flooded through her. Someday a girl would come and take it away from her. Someday she would lie on this table and endure this cruel torture so that she could continue on. She wasn’t sure which possibility was worse.

“Life and death,” Cormac murmured, his gaze locked on her. “You’ll hold them both in your hands. Are you prepared for that?”

Loricel drew a long, shaky breath and tore her eyes from the macabre exam table. “I’m ready.”

She hadn’t known what pain was then, but she did now. It snaked through her blood and burned across her flesh. Like Kinsey, she’d endured her own share of transplants. But each had been harder as each year revealed more and more that there was a price for Arras’s perfection. A price that grew harder for her to pay. It became impossible to ignore the truth about the transplanted threads that kept her alive.

Lives stolen.

Impossible choices.

Lies.

Her world had been as tangled as the warp that now held her prisoner.

Loricel forced herself to block the voices of the Tailors experimenting on her. It wouldn’t stop until they had what they wanted.

It couldn’t stop. Not if Arras was to survive.

It was also the most impossible decision of all—her own liberation or the world under her charge.

It was a decision no woman should have to make.

The girl’s hands slid effortlessly through the air. To any other eye, it would have looked as though she was simply wiggling her fingers, but Loricel could see what others could not.

She could see the strands.

It was impossible that the child’s parents could, and still they insisted on the nightly ritual, forcing the young girl to fumble. Loricel wasn’t sure what they actually expected to accomplish, but she knew they hoped to save her.

They were traitors.

Slouching back against her velvet cushion, the Creweler tried to process the strange cocktail of emotions this produced in her. They were traitors, disloyal to the world she fought so hard to protect. This girl, whose name she didn't dare learn, was clearly her successor. No one had shown this much naked talent in Loricel's lifetime. She was Loricel's chance at freedom, and they were trying to take that away.

Still the Creweler had watched and said nothing.

Because no matter how long she tried to sort her feelings about the girl into convenient boxes, one emotion always stood above all others.

Hope.

Not hope for relief. Hope that the girl would succeed. Hope that she would be spared.

Footsteps fell on the stairs outside her studio. Only one person had access to the highest room of the tower. Loricel hadn't taken an assistant in years. She'd be forced to do so soon in a show of good faith to the Guild. Perhaps that's why the Guild was calling now. Loricel cleared her thoughts and the walls of the studio shifted from the girl's basement to a view of the beach. Soundless water lapped at the edge of the walls. It looked real enough to step into, but she knew that was a foolish wish. The closest she'd gotten to a beach in her long life had been when one was wound around her fingers.

Loricel stood to greet her guest. Not as a matter of etiquette, but as a show of strength. Cormac Patton needed to be reminded of his place as often as possible.

"Loricel." He spread his arms in the welcoming gesture of a friend, but his face showed no fraternal affection.

"You aren't looking a day over forty," she said in mock sincerity.

"I can't say the same for you." Cormac ran his eyes over her with distaste. Loricel knew how she looked to him. Elderly. Frail. He saw her wrinkles and the hair as pale as her skin. She was no longer the round-faced girl he'd

met here years ago. The only remnants of that girl were the sharp emerald eyes fixed on him. “How long are you pushing back your treatments now?”

“It’s terribly busy work running a world,” she reminded him.

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

There was the rub. The true reason that she and Cormac Patton had become bitter enemies over the last century. Neither could concede the other’s importance. Cormac because he was afraid of his own impotence, and Loricel because she knew she was right.

“You aren’t going to live forever, especially if you allow so much time to pass between transplants. Are you searching for your replacement? Any likely candidates?” he asked, not bothering with subtlety.

“I’m afraid you’re stuck with me,” she retorted.

Cormac rounded on her, his face dropping so close to hers that she could smell the whiskey on his breath. “You will find a replacement. You can’t let this world go any more than I can.”

Loricel reached forward and straightened his bow tie. “Is that any way to speak to your *oldest* friend, Cormac? When I’m gone, who will you share your secrets with?”

“When you’re gone,” he said without hesitation, “I will dance on your grave.”

“And yet, I’ll be one who’s finally succeeded,” she hissed.

“Find your replacement.” He barked the order and turned on his heel. Pausing at the top of the spiral staircase, he called out, “We have contingencies, you old witch. You aren’t as powerful as you think you are.”

Loricel let the remark go. It was better to let him think he had her cornered. At least until she decided what to do. A puff of ginger fur leapt onto her lap and she patted her cat absentmindedly. Her mind drifted back to the girl. Maybe she was strong enough. Maybe she could be if she came here

knowing the truth. Loricel had been lied to. She'd watched everything she loved slip away even as the threads that bound her to Arras became more inexorable. But the girl was young. Anything could happen if she came to the Coventry.

If she came to the Coventry.

There was no noise in the lab unless one counted the silence, which felt deafening. Loricel spent her days in a perpetual waking nightmare. Never quite asleep. Never quite awake. Always trapped in memories and stuck in what-ifs and might-have-beens.

Her hand twitched.

That wasn't possible.

She flexed her fingers. They were *free*. An ache shot up her arm, but not a painful one. It was more like the delicious agony one feels when rising early in the morning and stretching the limbs. The sensation traveled up her other arm. It took her a moment to realize it wasn't a dream. It wasn't the memory of freedom. It was freedom.

The threads binding her body slackened and she crumpled forward, barely catching herself before she tipped over. No, someone had *caught her*.

"Steady there," a soft voice advised. A woman's voice.

Loricel leaned in and allowed the woman to help her, blinking as her vision returned. The world was a blur of colors and shapes that her mind couldn't process.

"Give it a moment. They told me you'll feel better soon, but your strength will take longer to return."

The Creweler nodded, uncertain whom to thank for her sudden liberation. If she should thank her at all.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have much time. I’m using all sorts of Agenda tech to get you out of here, but you have to listen to me if you’re going to escape.” The woman paused, and Loricel thought she heard her swallow. “If we’re going to survive—both of us—you’ll have to trust me.”

“There is no one behind these walls I trust. Not anymore.” Her words came out in dry croaks, her voice foreign to even her own ears.

The softness in the other woman’s voice shifted to indignation. “I got you out of those gages, and I can get you out of here tonight, but you’re going to have to trust me. So what is it? Trust me or step back into their cage?”

For once a decision didn’t feel so impossible to Loricel. Whoever her savior was and whatever she wanted with her couldn’t be worse than staying here and continuing to be the Tailors’experiment. “Fine. What is this plan?”

The woman swam into view, and Loricel realized she was really still a girl. Slick oil-black hair pinned back in the artful work of an aesthetician. Large, almond eyes with irises as dark as coffee. Loricel knew her, although she couldn’t quite remember her name. The old woman had existed in a state of timelessness for so long that she couldn’t sort the details of her recent life into place.

“Friends are waiting to take you to the Eastern Sector where the Agenda movement is strong. When you walk out those doors”—she pointed to a set of large, steel doors that seemed little more than a nebulous gray triangle to the older woman’s still-blurry vision—“you will turn right. At the end of the hall, they’ll meet you. All you have to do is make it to the end of the hall. We’ve disrupted the security feed long enough for you to pass safely through.”

It could be a trick, but what would be the point of that? If Cormac wanted Loricel dead, he could have ordered a clean termination. There was no need for theatrics. No one knew the fate of Arras’s Creweler, save for the people who tested and tortured her in this lab.

“You won’t have much time,” the girl continued, stepping into the vault Loricel had recently vacated, “and I’ll need you to bind me here.”

“Why would I do that?” Loricel snapped. It would only implicate the girl in the escape.

“I’ve visited you quite often the last few weeks.” It was the only explanation the girl offered, but it was enough to tell Loricel what she needed to know.

“You’re the girl who’s been receiving my *donations*.” She spit the word out.

The girl nodded grimly. “I received one today. I was in the next lab recovering. It won’t be a stretch for them to believe you freed yourself and imprisoned me.”

“I hope, for your sake, that you’re one hell of a liar.”

“Trust me, I am.”

“And you’ve been Agenda this whole time?”Loricel asked, moving closer so that she could see the girl’s face more clearly.

The girl could have lied, especially if she was proficient with the skill as she claimed. Instead she squared her shoulders and shook her head. “I’m not Agenda. I’m simply tired of this experiment. It isn’t working.”

She didn’t have to tell Loricel that. The Creweler had overheard enough conversations to know the Guild’s plans to splice her genetic material with another Spinster’s had failed. “So you’ve turned tail and run to the enemy.”

“Any enemy who can put a stop to these cruel games is my friend.” Her words were cautious. She wasn’t a traitor. She was a survivor.

“And whose side will you be on in the morning?”

“My own,” the girl answered truthfully. “But I’ve seen things . . .”

“That make you question how far you’re willing to go for the Guild?” Loricel guessed. How could anyone who’d experienced half what she had not question their tactics?

“Where I stand doesn’t matter. You’re running out of time.” The girl let her words hang in the air. They weren’t so much a temptation as a warning. This was Loricel’s chance—and when she was free, she could once again consider what was best for Arras. The Agenda had to know where Adelice was. Her young apprentice had seen Earth by now. She knew the truth. Hopefully she could do more with the information than Loricel ever had.

Hope felt foreign as it settled over the old woman’s body, at once lightening the weight she’d carried for years and burdening her with its responsibility.

Loricel reached forward and grasped the girl’s wrist, bringing it roughly into the shackle that had bound her own minutes before. Then she paused and peered into her dark eyes. “There is something that matters. To me, at least. Forgive an old woman, but what is your name?”

The girl’s lips opened as the gage closed over her hand, and she looked fearlessly into the old woman’s eyes. “Pryana.”
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